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PLANS FOR CO-OPERATIVE RESEARCH¹

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Co-operative investigations of subjects of peculiar interest to sociologists were proposed as a part of the activities of the American Sociological Society about seven years ago. The late Professor C. R. Henderson, chairman of the committee appointed to initiate the undertaking, corresponded with members of the Society about the subjects and methods suitable for a joint study. Unfortunately his failing health and untimely death prevented the execution of plans which appealed strongly to many college teachers, who felt that inductive studies of present social conditions should be a part of the training of their students, but who saw no practicable means of collecting the data necessary for a sound statistical investigation. Two years ago, at the Philadelphia meeting of the Society, the subject of co-operative research was revived and another committee appointed for its consideration. At the recent Chicago meeting, Professor J. L. Gillin, the chairman of this committee, made a preliminary report of research activities of members of the Sociological Society and recommended that I be authorized to try the experiment of enlisting groups of women students in a co-operative investigation of a subject to be selected by the committee.

An opportunity for the free discussion of the plans and aims of such nation-wide joint studies of social questions should be given to members of the Sociological Society. As I have been a member of both research committees of the Society and am planning our first co-operative investigation, it seems suitable that I should invite such a discussion by setting forth in this open letter my ideas about the policies and methods of work suitable for such an undertaking. It is hoped that all members of the Society, particularly those who direct groups of students who may participate in the studies, will feel free to criticize and amend the plans which I suggest.

¹ An open letter to members of the Sociological Society.

SUBJECTS TO BE STUDIED

A study of methods by which self-supporting women may provide for their old age was authorized by the committee as the first topic for co-operative research. I suggested this subject because it will interest women students looking forward to self-support, because women in need of such protection can be found in all parts of the country, and because far-reaching questions dealing with changes in family life and with the development of new forms of social insurance will be involved in the discussions of the data collected. In case we succeed in enlisting a number of co-operating directors of investigations, some more democratic methods of selecting future topics for study should be developed. Leaders of the different research groups could come together at the annual meeting of the Sociological Society for the consideration of suggestions and the selection of one or more topics suitable for joint investigations.

CENTRALIZING THE CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

One person or group of persons must be responsible for planning and supervising each joint investigation and must undertake to gather the results of the various local studies into a final report. At present the Sociological Society is unable to supply anyone who can give his entire time to this task. The members of its Research Committee come together only for a few hasty conferences between the sessions of the annual meeting. Two or more professors serving on the same faculty might share the labors of planning and reporting results of an investigation. The large groups of students attending the sociology classes make possible the enlistment of assistance in collecting data for studies of several subjects. It might be possible at each annual meeting to authorize studies of three or more subjects, each to be directed by one or more members of the Sociological Society.

OPPORTUNITY FOR VARIED FORMS OF RESEARCH

Some such latitude in the choice of subjects and methods of work seems desirable, since the teachers of sociological research courses are apt to prefer special methods of work, and the opportunities for satisfactory field work in the neighborhoods of different colleges vary widely. Teachers accustomed to a statistical approach to a subject may not care to direct a study requiring intensive case work, and case workers often have but slight respect for statistical presentations. Public records

may be complete and readily accessible in one state, and defective and jealously guarded from inspection in another. The preliminary statements of the persons directing the studies should indicate the proposed sources of information and the general plans for dealing with the studies, so that co-operating directors of local groups could select undertakings with which they were in sympathy and could produce results comparable with the work of other investigators and so readily embodied in a final report.

PREPARATION OF QUESTIONNAIRES AND DIRECTIONS TO FIELD WORKERS

Since the collection of sufficiently large masses of facts to supply bases for sound generalizations about social phenomena is the aim of co-operative research, there must be preliminary agreements about what topics shall be covered in the investigations. The person or persons who undertake to plan the studies and to write the final reports should prepare tentative questionnaires and directions to field workers and submit them for suggestions to all leaders of co-operating groups. Questionnaires or schedules of topics to be observed should be so simple that they can be used readily by students. A minimum number of topics should be covered by all field workers, but latitude could be allowed for more intensive studies by suitably equipped investigators. Questionnaires might be published once in the *Journal* and reproduced in quantities desired by the local groups, or the directors of each study might have their questionnaires and instructions to field workers printed and sold to all co-operating groups. The tendency of students to make a careless use of such blanks would be checked by requiring the payment of the small cost of productions.

TABULATION FORMS FOR STATISTICAL TABLES

Directors of statistical studies should plan a minimum number of the more important tables which they wish for the final report. Blank tabulation forms for these tables should be furnished to each co-operating group. The final summarizing of data would be greatly facilitated by these uniform tables. Students would be free to prepare as many additional tables as their ingenuity could devise. The filled-in questionnaires or schedules on which tables are based should always be forwarded to the central group of directors in order that the work may be verified or corrected.

REPORTS OF LOCAL GROUPS

Graduate students looking for material suitable for master's or doctor's dissertations might organize and summarize the data collected by local co-operating groups. Such reports would be suitable for publication in local papers or magazines. When the subject chosen is related to state or municipal activities, the reports could be published as public documents.

FINAL SUMMARY REPORT OF THE RESULTS
OF THE INVESTIGATION

The final summary report should be prepared by the director or directors who initiated and planned the study. No doubt the *Journal* would welcome a discussion so securely founded on concrete data. Interest in its pages would be stimulated, as there would be hundreds or even thousands who had participated in, or been the subjects of, the investigations. When the reports are of sufficient scope and interest, the *Journal* articles could be reproduced in book form. It is even conceivable, though very doubtful, that the hard-working directors of the investigation might reap a small royalty with which to finance their next undertaking.

EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF SUCH CO-OPERATIVE RESEARCH

The rudiments of sound, inductive investigations of social phenomena would be learned by persons who participated in such studies. The utilization of students working under competent direction would do away with the enormous costs of field work which have been the chief deterrents of sound sociological research. No professor can pay the traveling expenses and salaries of persons required to collect information about present social conditions, but co-operating groups might be found in every state of the Union. Moreover, these local groups are familiar with their environments and more competent for an intelligent collection of data than visiting field workers who might be sent by federal bureaus or by one of the heavily endowed foundations of New York City. Participation in these co-operative research groups would prepare students to pass the civil-service examinations which admit to the staffs of the various governmental agencies, and these agencies are charged with the duty of conducting public investigations which supply sound foundations for constructive legislation.